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Cooperative Extension Service

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Cholesterol

Triglycerides, HDL's, LDL's, VLDL's,...is anyone else confused? I'd like to help you sort the fact from the fiction relating to health and cholesterol—the good, the bad, and everything in-between. Even better, I will try to do it using as few acronyms as possible.

Cholesterol is essential for many functions within the body, including the construction of cell membranes and many of our hormones. Though it is required for these functions, it is not considered an essential nutrient because we are able to make all the cholesterol we need from other substances within our body. While a certain amount of cholesterol is required for health, too much in our blood can have negative health consequences.

Triglycerides are the major form of fat we eat and store in the body, and a major source of energy. Similar to cholesterol, they can be obtained through the diet, or made within the body. High triglyceride levels are associated with atherosclerosis, a disease that can cause heart attacks and strokes.

High levels of LDL and VLDL cholesterol encourage the formation of deposits on our artery walls that also lead to the development of atherosclerosis. This is why LDL cholesterol are often called 'bad' cholesterol. In contrast, HDL cholesterol, known as 'good' cholesterol, helps to remove cholesterol from the body. Higher levels of this cholesterol are considered positive for good health.

Many factors help to determine your personal cholesterol levels. As with most things, genetics plays the biggest role, but there are also many dietary and lifestyle choices you can make to help control your cholesterol. The most important dietary choice is to limit saturated and *trans* fats. These are found mainly in red meat and foods that are baked and fried. Replacing these fats with mono- and poly-unsaturated fats, like those found in olive and canola oils, along with omega-3 fats found in fish and flaxseed oils can be beneficial on blood cholesterol levels. Regular exercise and weight loss (if you are overweight) also positively affect cholesterol, as does adequate fiber intake. Moderate alcohol consumption may also be beneficial, but be careful! Drinking too much increases risk for high blood pressure and heart failure.

The American Heart Association recommends keeping your LDL cholesterol under 100 mg/dL, and your HDL *above* 40 mg/dL. Triglycerides should be under 150 mg/dL. Remember, this is in a fasting blood sample! Your levels will not be an accurate reflection of your health if you don't fast before your blood draw. It is recommended that everyone over the age 20 have these levels checked at least every 5 years. If you currently have known risk factors for heart disease your doctor may ask that you have your levels checked more often. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*